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ABSTRACT

That the daily challenges facing public-school leaders can sometimes be overwhelming is the underlying theme of this report. The study on which the report is based focused on superintendents' and principals' views on and concerns about leadership. Data for the study were gathered in 2001 from surveys of 853 public-school superintendents and 909 public-school principals randomly selected. The data are presented in text, graphs, charts, and tables in this report. Following are some of the findings of the study. Many administrators believe effective leadership can turn around most troubled schools, but politics and bureaucracy, not lack of funding, are the biggest hindrances. Most superintendents (81 percent) point to politics and bureaucracy as the main reasons for leaving the field. Among the chief complaints of principals is the lack of autonomy to reward exceptional teachers and fire ineffective ones. Some 54 percent of superintendents say they have to work around the school system to get things done, and 10 percent say the system actually hinders their work. About 57 percent of principals say that in their district administrators are so overwhelmed by day-to-day management that their ability to provide visions and leadership is stymied. (Contains 11 endnotes.) (WFA)

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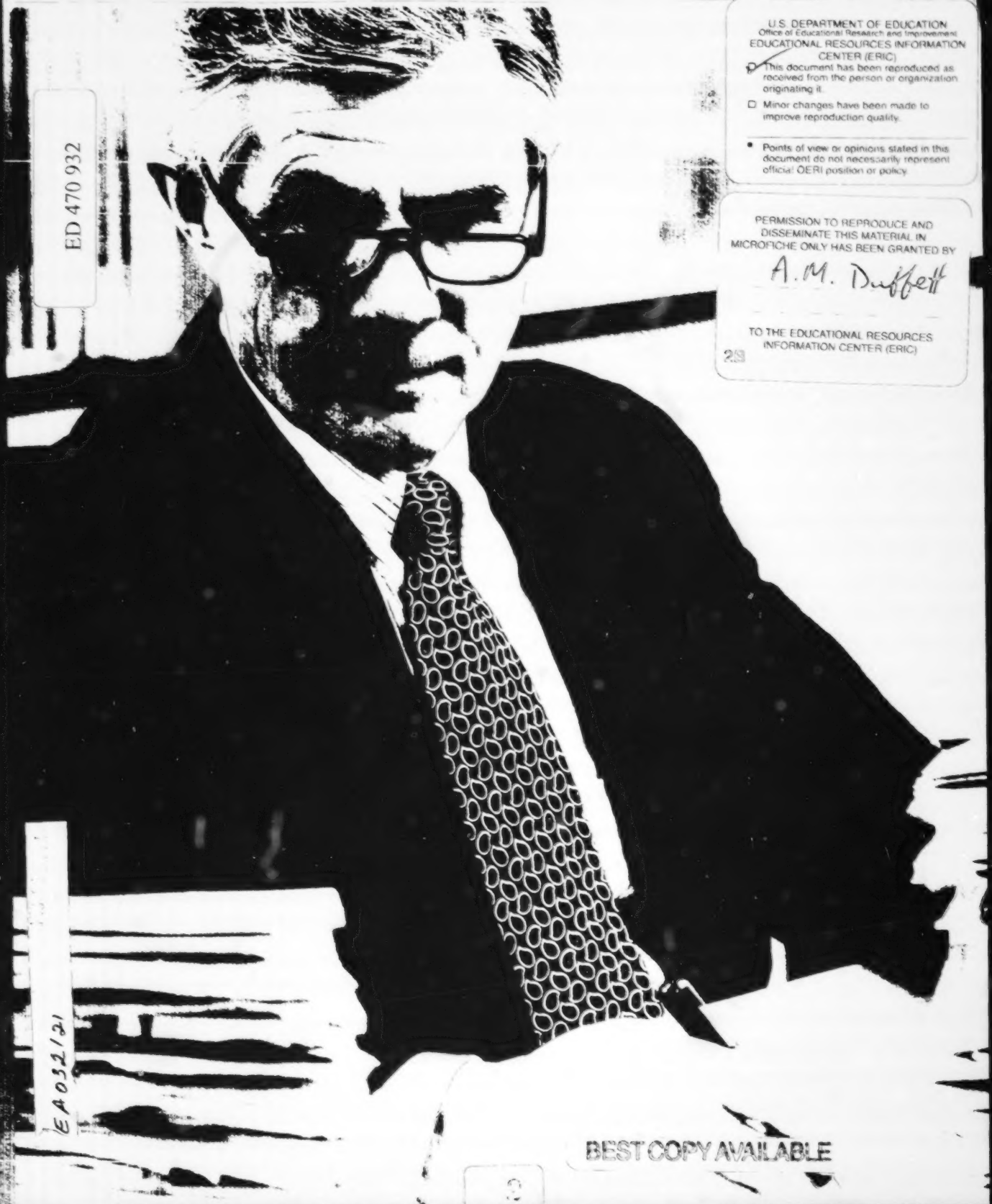
TRYING TO STAY AHEAD OF THE GAME

Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership



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Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership

A report from Public Agenda
By Steve Farkas,
Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett and
Tony Foleno, with Patrick Foley

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ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Public Agenda's particular expertise lies in crafting research studies that explore different points of view with empathy and that probe beneath surface responses to capture the public's concerns and assumptions. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Our citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum. Our Web site, Public Agenda Online, provides comprehensive information on a wide range of public opinion and public policy issues.

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ABOUT WALLACE–READER'S DIGEST FUNDS

The Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds seek to create opportunities for people to enrich themselves through better schools, enhanced community activities, and participation in the arts. The focus of the Wallace Funds' education work is LEADERS Count, a national initiative aimed at strengthening the ability of principals and superintendents to improve student learning and building a new field of knowledge that helps improvements spread on a broad scale.

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And Public Agenda's President, Deborah Wadsworth, whose dedication to the issues and remarkable insight guide our organization.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 5

CHAPTER ONE: Politics, as Usual 7

CHAPTER TWO: Keeping Our House in Order 12

CHAPTER THREE: Standards Bearers 15

CHAPTER FOUR: Making Ends Meet 19

CHAPTER FIVE: Quality, Not Quantity 22

CHAPTER SIX: Attracting and Retaining Talented Leaders 26

CHAPTER SEVEN: On-the-Job Training 30

AN AFTERWORD By Deborah Wadsworth 32

SUPPORTING TABLES 34

ENDNOTES 45

METHODOLOGY 47

RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS 48

INTRODUCTION

The job is "almost overwhelming," wrote one public school principal responding to Public Agenda's most recent study on public education. "My desk is never clear of obligations…Constant interruptions from parents, teachers…Principals do not have a lunch hour."

Few would expect a principal's day to be leisurely and contemplative, but the sheer sensory overload experienced by many school leaders is a key theme of *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership*. This new Public Agenda report is based on in-depth surveys of 853 randomly-selected public school superintendents and 909 randomly-selected public school principals. The surveys were conducted in summer 2001.

Covering topics ranging from school funding to academic standards to professional development and training, the surveys offer a detailed and unusually complete look at what these high-level, center-of-the-action educators have to say. And, it could easily be argued, understanding the distinctive perspective of superintendents and principals has become more important than ever. Strong leadership, important in any era, can be pivotal as education faces a time of change and challenge.

Who Will Serve?

Over the past several years, educational decision-makers have launched a wide-ranging discussion of how to enhance school leadership and, particularly, how to respond to a projected shortage of superintendents and principals that has already surfaced in some areas. It is hardly surprising that those working to improve public education would turn serious attention to school leadership. Nearly every aspect of public education – curriculum, testing, funding, teaching, parental involvement and so on – has been critiqued and reconsidered over the past decade. Scrutinizing the role superintendents and principals play in shaping and leading good schools is an intelligent next step.

Elected officials, major foundations, academic researchers, leadership task forces – all have begun to wrestle with the challenges of providing strong leadership for the nation's public schools. Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (NY), John Kerry (MA) and Gordon Smith (OR) have proposed various bills to address the issue.

"My desk is never clear of obligations…Constant interruptions from parents, teachers…Principals do not have a lunch hour."

— Principal

The Ford Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education have provided significant support to the Institute for Educational Leadership in Washington, D.C., to investigate ways to improve school leadership. The Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds, which supported this Public Agenda research, has made a decade-long commitment to foster a national movement aimed at elevating quality education leadership as a core element of school reform. As part of that effort, the Public Agenda surveys reported here will be repeated twice over the next three years to help decision-makers understand more about the perspectives of superintendents and principals and to monitor progress in addressing their key concerns.

Adding Another Perspective

Public Agenda's look at the day-to-day realities superintendents and principals encounter is the latest of more than a dozen opinion studies on public education the organization has conducted over the last decade. This body of work has examined a wide variety of educational topics including student achievement, academic standards, curriculum, safety and discipline, integration, accountability, school choice, parental involvement, bilingual education and the status of the teaching profession, among others.

During this time, we have looked closely at the views of the general public, parents, teachers, students, employers and college professors, along with those of key subgroups such as white, African American, Hispanic and foreign-born parents.

Like most Public Agenda studies, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game* grows out of a multifaceted research effort that began with a review of existing studies on school leadership and a series of in-depth interviews with leading experts on the topic. Public Agenda also conducted a series of one-on-one and group interviews with practicing superintendents and principals, including those in urban, suburban and rural districts and those from different parts of the country. The heart of the research consisted of two national mail surveys, one directed to superintendents, the other to principals.

The study contains some perhaps unexpected news on what school leaders say their real hurdles are.

Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game summarizes the most important results from this entire range of research. More detailed findings from the surveys are available from Public Agenda in a separate technical appendix.

Principal for a Day

In New York City – and many other cities across the country – business and community groups have organized popular programs that allow local leaders to spend one day "working" as the principal of a school. The goal is to offer leaders outside the field of education an authentic, surround-sound feel for what local schools need and the challenges they face. *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game* cannot, of course, put every reader right into the principal's chair, but perhaps it can provide the next best thing: a down-to-earth, nitty-gritty feel for what superintendents and principals contend with on a daily basis. What's more, it contains some perhaps unexpected news on what school leaders say their real hurdles are and what they believe would really help them make schools better.

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CHAPTER ONE: POLITICS, AS USUAL

Superintendents and principals nationwide voice confidence that they can improve public education, but say their effectiveness is hampered by politics and bureaucracy.

After sustained efforts to raise academic standards in the nation's public schools, and a renewed focus on teacher quality, it is perhaps inevitable that the focus has increasingly moved to the key role school leaders play in school improvement.

A Can-Do Spirit

The nation's superintendents and principals evince a strong can-do spirit, a confidence that they can make a difference – even in the toughest districts, even in the toughest schools. In short, school leaders think leaders count. As one principal commented about the job, "Even though the demands are often overwhelming, I enjoy my job. I know we make a difference."

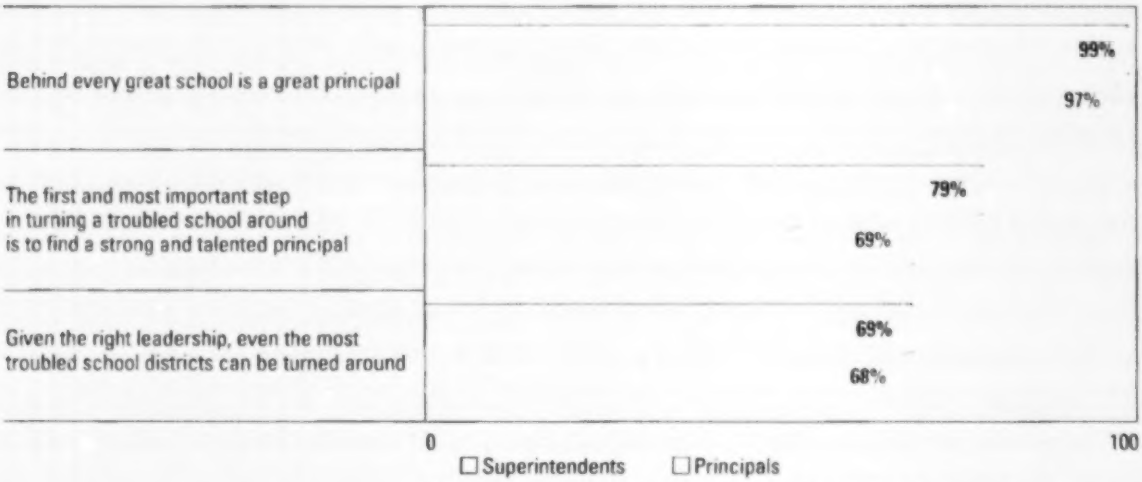
"Behind every great school is a great principal," agree virtually all school superintendents (99%) and principals (97%) surveyed. Perhaps more impressively, this is a conviction affirmed by seasoned educators, not the obligatory exuberance of newcomers: the vast majority of the superintendents (69%) and principals (72%) in our sample have five or more years of experience in their role. "The principalship is a hard and demanding job," said one principal, "but it is the key to success of schools. A good principal can make the difference…and we need more people willing to make that difference."

Even the Most Troubled Schools

In the minds of administrators, leadership is the first – perhaps most essential – step to improving the nation's most troubled schools and districts. Nearly seven in ten superintendents (69%) and principals (68%) believe that "given the right leadership, even the most troubled school districts can be turned around"; only 28% of both groups say that "some school districts

Leadership Counts

% of respondents who say:


Behind every great school is a great principal
99%
97%
The first and most important step in turning a troubled school around is to find a strong and talented principal
79%
69%
Given the right leadership, even the most troubled school districts can be turned around
69%
68%
0
100
Superintendents
Principals

Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

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face such daunting problems that even the best leadership can't turn things around." Finding a talented principal is the first and most important step to take if you want to fix a troubled school, say 79% of superintendents and 69% of principals; only small percentages say "turning a troubled school around is so difficult that it is simplistic to think that one individual is the key" (20% and 28%, respectively).

To some, the confidence exuded by such professionals may be unsurprising – after all, one would hardly expect doctors to approach patients with an "I can only do so much" shrug of the shoulders. But education seems to be a field notorious for obstacles – real and perceptual – to making a difference. Teachers, for example, routinely cite societal problems and lack of parental involvement as daunting barriers that make it all but impossible to effectively do their jobs.[1] It may therefore be more than reassuring to know that administrators have faith in their own capacity to make a difference.

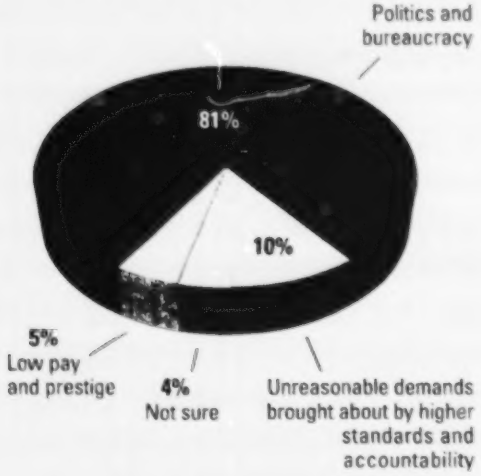
A Surfeit of Pressures

Despite their sense of efficacy, however, it is clear that most school leaders – especially superintendents – must contend with a surfeit of pressures and battles that build up and can threaten to overwhelm them.

Fully 81% of superintendents say that when talented superintendents leave the field, they are most likely to do so because they are "frustrated by politics and bureaucracy" in their district. Some education experts believe that the pressures of greater accountability and low pay are driving the best and brightest out of the superintendency. But superintendents say the relentless pressure of politics is much more to blame for pushing their colleagues out of the profession than low pay (5%) or unreasonable demands brought about by higher standards and accountability (10%). In a focus group with superintendents, one told us: "I believe that being a superintendent or principal has to do with motivation, drive, vision and caring for people – not how much money one makes. I will be retiring this year after 35 years in the business. I am tired of … dancing around the political games…"

Frustrated by Politics and Bureaucracy

If you had to pick one of the following, which comes closest to your own view? Talented superintendents / principals who leave the field are most likely to leave because they are frustrated by:



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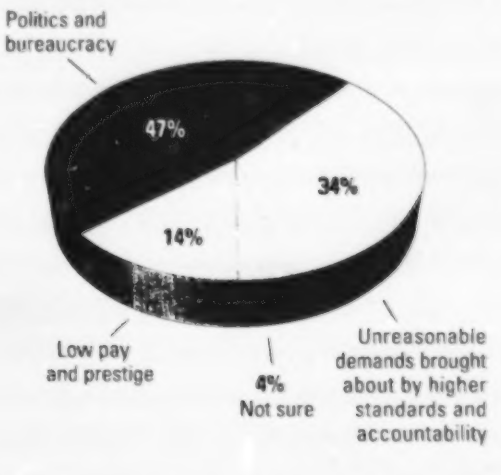

PRINCIPALS

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Principals also feel the political heat, though apparently to a lesser extent: 47% say talented principals leave because of politics and bureaucracy. One principal came out of retirement only when he was confident that in his new district he could ignore politics. "My advantage is also [that] after retiring and coming back, I do what I think should be done, forget politics. It was because of politics that I retired, and the only reason I stay in education now is because of the super."

Professionals in Handcuffs

School leaders' time is often not their own and their freedom to act and take initiative is often constrained. Nearly nine in ten (88%) superintendents complain that "keeping up with all the local, state and federal mandates handed down to the schools takes up way too much time." One superintendent said, "For the last 13 years, additional tasks and responsibilities have been added on, and nothing has been taken off our plate. Adding on the challenges of community politics, diverse cultures and languages, multi-track year-round calendar and political mandates can make the job overwhelming."

When superintendents look back at how they spent their time over the last school year, half (50%) say legal issues and litigation got too much of their attention; 48% point to parents with complaints or special interests; and 43% point to issues having to do with unions and collective bargaining. One administrator wrote: "Litigation concerns give extreme parents and special interest groups far too much contact and make management, safety and instructional issues far more complex than necessary." Another said more bluntly: "Teacher union fanatics also take their toll."

Intrigue and Interference

An additional area of concern – and one of the perennial subjects of political intrigue and media coverage – is the state of superintendent-school board relations. In this and in previous Public Agenda research, superintendents report a mixed picture: there are sources of tension and sources of comfort in their relationships with their boards. About seven in ten superintendents (69%) say there are times when their own school board interferes too much in areas best left to their discretion; only 29% report this does not happen. Nearly two-thirds (65%) believe that "too many school boards would rather hire a superintendent they can control" rather than look for one who is a strong leader. Only a slim majority of the nation's superintendents (52%) can say that when the chips are down – when crisis or controversy hits their district – they can "virtually always" count on the support of their school board.

> ***"Being a superintendent or principal has to do with motivation, drive, vision and caring for people – not how much money one makes. I will be retiring this year after 35 years. I am tired of dancing around the political games."***
>
> *— Ohio Superintendent*

On the other hand, many administrators who participated in the study wrote positive comments about their boards. One superintendent said: "This is the best board I had the opportunity to work with in seven years." Moreover, in Public Agenda's recent study of superintendents and school board members called *Just Waiting to Be Asked? A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement*, both groups overwhelmingly characterized their relations with each other as "mostly cooperative" rather than "mostly contentious" (superintendents: 87% cooperative vs. 6% contentious; board members: 77% vs. 10%, respectively).[2]

Part of the Job

Rather than being an occasional irritant, managing politics, school boards, complaining parents and other special interests appears to have become so normal to administrators that it is now part of the very definition of their role. In fact, 81% of superintendents and 70% of principals say "managing harsh public criticism and political heat" has become a routine part of their job. Little wonder then that knowing "how to build support

among and manage the power of different interest groups" rates as a "absolutely essential" quality of good leadership by 75% of superintendents and 72% of principals.

But it is perhaps most extraordinary to hear many of these leaders say that they cannot take the school system's help for granted when they try to get things done. Approximately half of superintendents (54%) and principals (48%) say that they can usually get things done the way they want, but they must work around the system; and some others say their "hands are tied" (10% and 19%, respectively). Only about a third of each group thinks the system works to help them accomplish their goals.

"Don't Try to Do Everything"

Even more important, school administrators face this critical challenge: how to maintain a focus on the true business at hand – educating children – in an environment where interest group politics, board relations and a regulatory muddle conspire to handcuff their leadership.

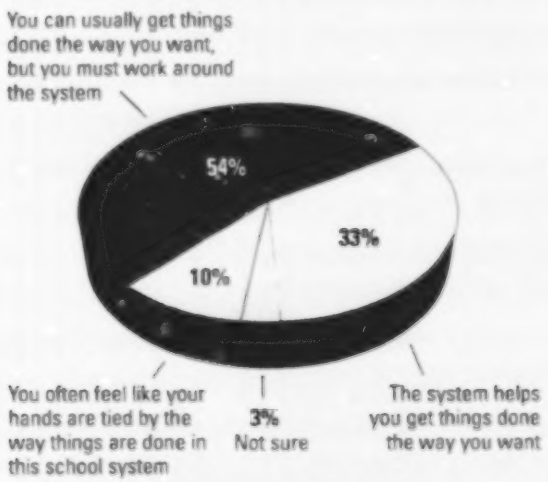
"Stay focused," "don't get distracted," "don't try to do everything," frontline superintendents and principals repeatedly emphasized in one-on-one interviews preceding the survey. These mantras are their way of reminding themselves to maintain direction and purpose. And the survey results drive this point home in dramatic and overwhelming fashion.

"Stay focused," "don't get distracted," "don't try to do everything," frontline superintendents and principals repeatedly emphasized.

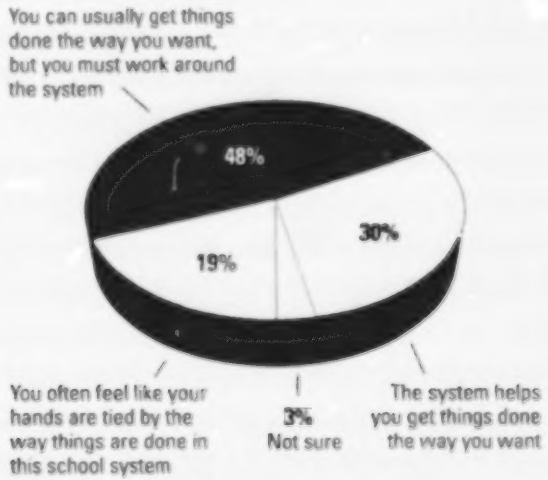
Part of being a good administrator is to "stick to a few core goals and avoid getting sidetracked by peripheral initiatives," agree virtually all superintendents (92%) and principals (92%). A good leader, say these administrators, must have "the ability to make tough decisions" (96% and 95%, respectively); must remember to "put the interests of children above all else" (95%, 94%); and must be able to "communicate a clear educational vision and priorities" (91%, 89%). One 22-year veteran principal wrote: "I think leadership is the most important factor – vision,

Working Around the System

Which of these best describes your typical experience when trying to get things done the way you want them to be done:


You can usually get things done the way you want, but you must work around the system
54%
33%
10%
You often feel like your hands are tied by the way things are done in this school system
3%
Not sure
The system helps you get things done the way you want

SUPERINTENDENTS


You can usually get things done the way you want, but you must work around the system
48%
30%
19%
You often feel like your hands are tied by the way things are done in this school system
3%
Not sure
The system helps you get things done the way you want

PRINCIPALS

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ability to inspire, courage to protect the vision and beliefs and values of the organization." Otherwise, they warned, their energy will dissipate, their initiatives will fracture, and their tenure will come and go with little to show for it.

An Overcrowded Agenda

It may be quite useful for school reformers to keep in mind this telling portrait of the circumstances in which working administrators find themselves. There are growing calls, for example, to transform the job description of school administrators from primarily managerial to instructional, so that they are not only able to recognize excellent teaching but demonstrate it as well. But to take root, this attractive notion must contend with the overcrowded agenda that so many school leaders appear to already face. To survive – much less make a difference – administrators must manage the politics, the daily pressures and the mandates of their district. The question is how to add one more challenge to this mix.

CHAPTER TWO: KEEPING OUR HOUSE IN ORDER

What superintendents and principals need most, they say, is more freedom to do their jobs as they see fit – especially the freedom to reward and fire teachers.

School administrators are confident that they can make a difference, so accountability is not a forbidding concept to them – as long as they are given the tools and autonomy they need to succeed. If you want to improve educational leadership, "giving administrators far more autonomy to run the schools while holding them accountable for getting results" would be an effective way to do so, say approximately nine in ten superintendents (45% very effective, 47% somewhat effective) and principals (38% very effective, 51% somewhat effective).

The Freedom They Need

Yet as chapter one makes abundantly clear, administrators say they are often stymied by mandates and politics that rule their district. Their frustration comes closest to boiling over when they talk about being handcuffed in handling teaching staff.

It is useful to make some clear distinctions about what is and is not a problem as far as administrators are concerned. Most superintendents and principals have no complaints about being able to choose the teachers they want: 78% and 71%, respectively, say they "have enough freedom and autonomy" when it comes to hiring teachers and other staff. This is clearly good news because the capacity to recruit and develop a talented corps of teachers is seen as an "absolutely essential" quality of good leadership (superintendents, 82%; principals, 86%).

Reward Stellar Teachers

What seems to really frustrate administrators is their sense that they are hamstrung when they see stellar teachers they wish to reward or when they run across truly ineffective teachers they want to remove. Relatively few superintendents and principals (24% and 32%, respectively) say they have enough autonomy to "reward outstanding teachers and staff" – the rest say they need more. And relatively few (28% and 32%, respectively) say they have enough freedom when it comes to "removing ineffective teachers from the classroom" – the rest say they need more. One superintendent ended his survey with this comment: "Two things will improve the quality of education. One, get rid of tenure. Two, raise teacher salaries."

It is difficult to find a concrete issue in the working environment of administrators that generates as much energy. This issue clearly represents more than a simple desire for additional power merely for the sake of acquiring it. Most administrators, for example, are satisfied with their autonomy in other serious areas of policy such as student discipline, curriculum issues and even purchasing supplies and services.

Few say they have enough freedom when it comes to rewarding outstanding teachers and staff – the rest say they need more.

Remove Ineffective Staff

But good leaders, school administrators believe, should be able to hold staff accountable for getting results. So when they are asked about 11 different approaches to improving educational leadership, the largest majorities point to "making it much easier for principals to remove bad teachers – even those who have tenure" as a "very effective" proposal (73% of superintendents and 69% of principals). "If I had the power I would do away with the teacher union," said one principal. "I know of no other job which you have for life after a few years of experience."

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This issue appears to have special resonance in urban areas: 54% of principals in urban districts say they need a lot more autonomy to remove ineffective teachers, compared to 42% of suburban and 36% of rural principals.

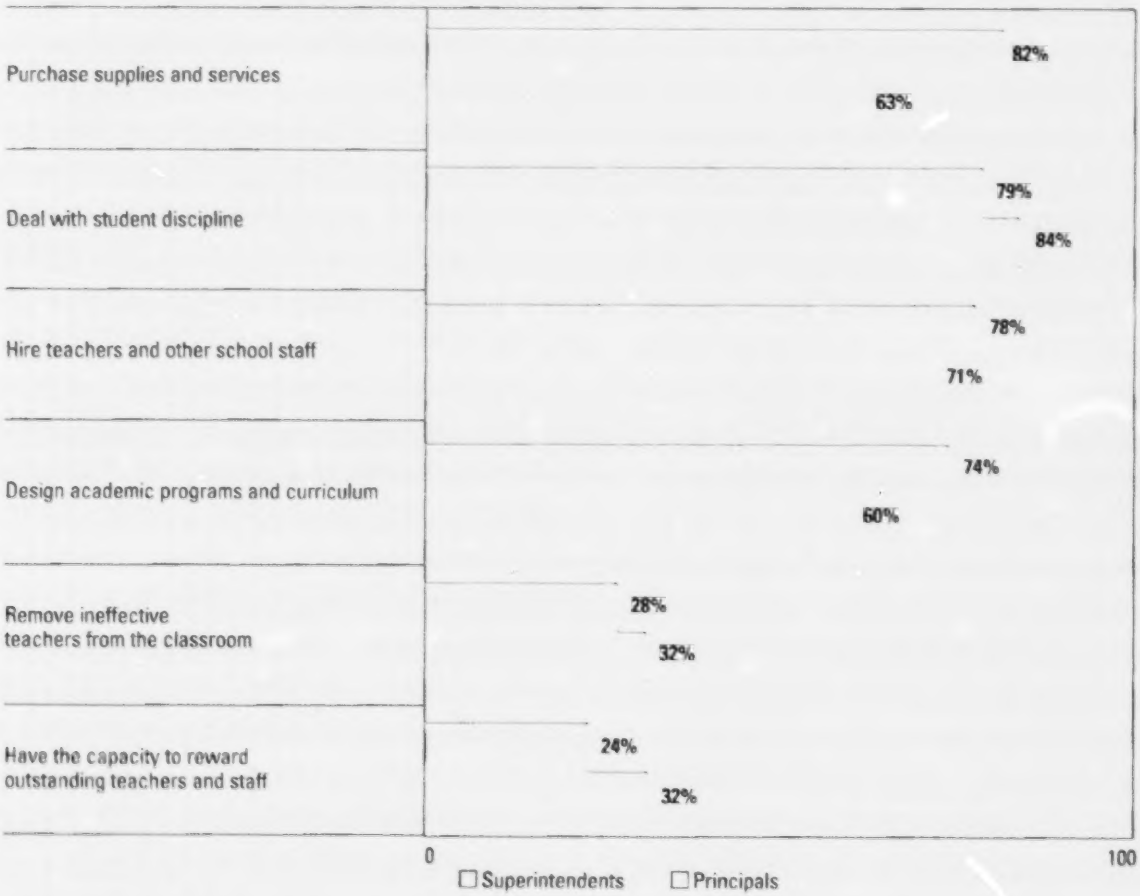
Just a Few Bad Apples

Teacher tenure is hardly a new topic, and perhaps it is worth highlighting precisely because it is so persistent. What's more, even teachers themselves acknowledge that this is an area that needs to be addressed. In a recent Public Agenda study of 604 public school teachers, 56% agreed that "the tenure system should be changed to make it far easier to remove bad teachers."[3] It is also useful to note that in face-to-face interviews and in surveys, teachers make clear that there are only a few "bad apples" anyway.[4]

It is also important to remember that administrators are not only looking for more leverage to remove ineffective teachers, they are also looking for ways to reward outstanding talent. In short, they are looking for ways to leverage more merit into the system. A recent Public Agenda study found that even a majority of public school teachers – specifically, those in the profession five years or less – think it would be a

The Power to Purchase Supplies

% of respondents who say they "have enough freedom and autonomy" to:



good idea to pay higher salaries to teachers in difficult schools with hard-to-educate children.[5] "The teacher union's support of ineffective or low performing teachers makes real progress in any district a challenge. Effective teachers need not fear tenure or termination," said one superintendent.

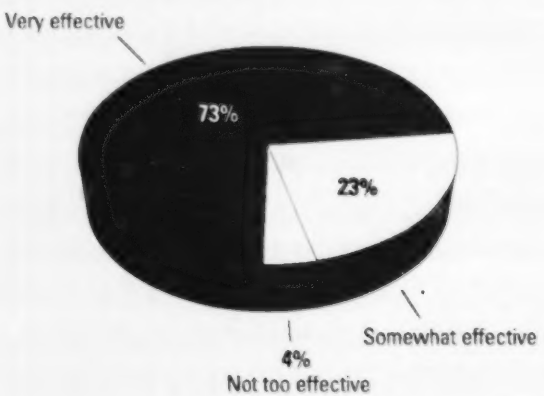
Unease Among Teachers

But it is also important to note that teachers are often uneasy about increasing the power of administrators to remove ineffective teachers or reward outstanding ones. They often have concerns about who would do the judging of superior or failing performance, what criteria would be used, and whether politics and favoritism – rather than merit – would end up driving such decisions. Perhaps more revealing, teachers reject any formula that would tie teacher or principal pay directly to improvements in students' academic performance. Three in four public school teachers (76%) think it would be a bad idea.[6]

The research suggests that many teachers believe they are in untenable situations. They are supposed to help every child achieve at a high academic level, but teachers also report problems with too many children who are unmotivated, disruptive and don't get enough attention at home.[7] Similarly, in focus groups, it isn't unusual for a teacher to recall a particular class – or individual children – who simply could not be reached, despite the teacher's best efforts.

Concerns about Tenure

Please indicate how effective you think the following would be to improve leadership in the nations schools: Making it much easier for principals to remove bad teachers, even those who have tenure.



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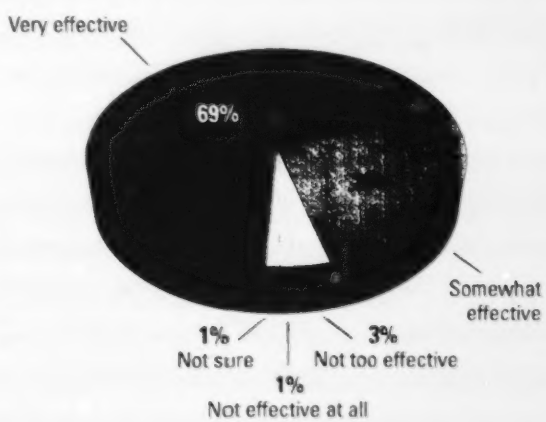

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CHAPTER THREE: STANDARDS BEARERS

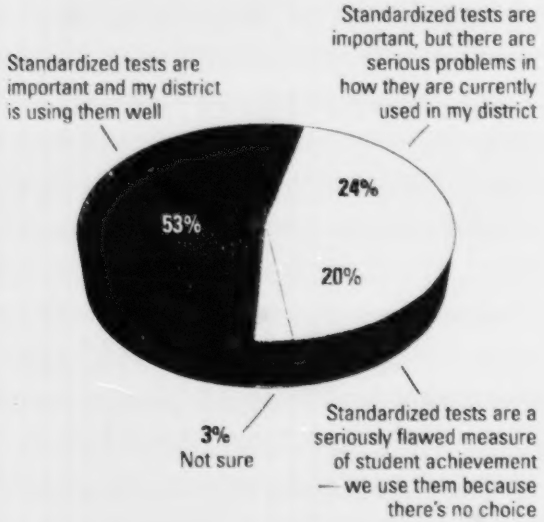
School leaders are far less worried about standards and accountability than about politics and bureaucracy, although they have some concerns. On the whole, superintendents are more positive about current trends and see testing as a way to hold principals more accountable. Principals voice more doubts.

Superintendents and principals share similar views on many educational issues. Both groups voice frustration with the politics and bureaucracy that they believe hamper their effectiveness. Both groups seem to yearn to reward teachers who meet their expectations and rid schools of teachers who don't. As we will see in later chapters, they find much to agree on when asked to think about the state of their profession and what will be needed to attract the best people to it. Yet despite these and other similarities, their outlooks diverge to some extent when it comes to the controversial area of standards and testing.

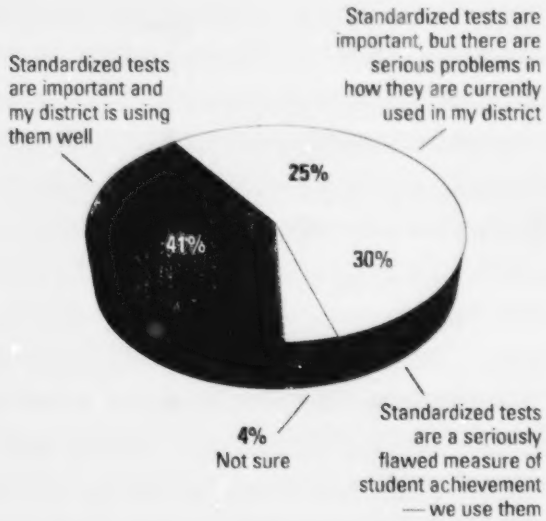
There is little doubt that superintendents and principals believe strongly that most youngsters can learn more in school and should be asked to do so. Earlier Public Agenda research has shown, for example, that an overwhelming majority of administrators believe that it is "absolutely essential" for teachers to have "high standards and expectations for all students" (87%).[8] And superintendents, as would be expected, point to student achievement as one of their most important priorities.[9]

Mixed Views on Standardized Tests

Which comes closest to your own view about standardized testing in your district?


Standardized tests are important and my district is using them well
Standardized tests are important, but there are serious problems in how they are currently used in my district
53%
24%
20%
3%
Not sure
Standardized tests are a seriously flawed measure of student achievement — we use them because there's no choice

SUPERINTENDENTS


Standardized tests are important and my district is using them well
Standardized tests are important, but there are serious problems in how they are currently used in my district
41%
25%
30%
4%
Not sure
Standardized tests are a seriously flawed measure of student achievement — we use them because there's no choice

PRINCIPALS

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But despite their belief in the importance of high standards and expectations, results from this survey reveal some decidedly mixed views on the current weapon of choice: broader use of standardized tests to measure progress. Majorities of both groups agree that standardized tests are important and can reveal useful information, but sizeable numbers express doubts.

Superintendents: Testing Is a Useful Tool

As a group, superintendents are more positive. Over half (53%) say standardized tests are an important measure of student learning and that their own district uses them appropriately. Another 24% say standardized tests are important, but there are serious problems in how their district uses them. One in five superintendents consider standardized tests a seriously flawed measurement.

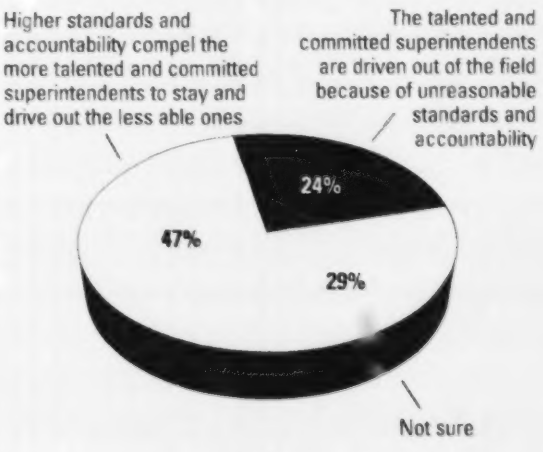
Healthy majorities of superintendents (67%) say it's a good idea to hold principals accountable for test scores at the building level, and most say tests are either an explicit (25%) or informal (50%) part of their principals' evaluations. And superintendents in large urban school districts – arguably those whose test scores are under the highest scrutiny – are even more likely to consider it a good idea to hold principals accountable for student test scores (84%).

Nor do most superintendents seem to flinch at the thought of having themselves held accountable in this way. Only 24% of superintendents say that talented and committed superintendents are driven out of the field because of unreasonable standards, compared to almost half (47%) who say instead that higher standards lead "talented and committed superintendents to stay and drive out the less able ones."

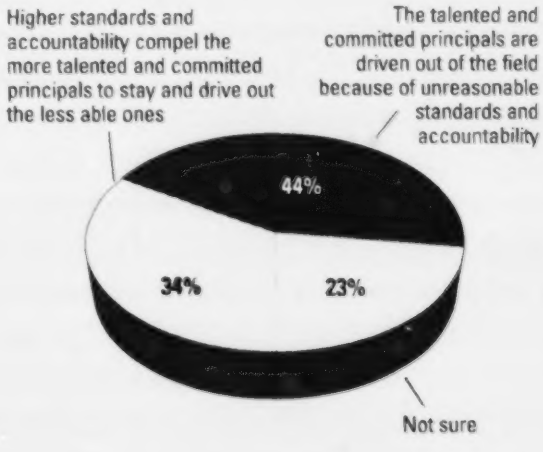
And, whatever pressure the standards movement may present for superintendents, it seems to pale in comparison to the politics and bureaucracy they find so enervating. As reported in chapter one, an overwhelming majority of superintendents say it's politics and bureaucracy that lead good people to abandon their profession, not low pay and prestige, and not the strain of implementing higher standards.

Impact of Higher Standards on School Leaders

Which comes closest to your own view on the impact that higher standards and accountability have on superintendents/principals?


Higher standards and accountability compel the more talented and committed superintendents to stay and drive out the less able ones
The talented and committed superintendents are driven out of the field because of unreasonable standards and accountability
24%
47%
29%
Not sure

SUPERINTENDENTS


Higher standards and accountability compel the more talented and committed principals to stay and drive out the less able ones
The talented and committed principals are driven out of the field because of unreasonable standards and accountability
44%
34%
23%
Not sure

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Principals: Dreading "One Day in March"

As a group, principals are considerably more divided about standards and accountability issues. While four in ten (41%) agree that tests are important and well used in their own district, one in four (25%) say the tests are important but badly used locally. Thirty percent say standardized tests are an essentially flawed measure of what students know. As one frustrated principal put it, "Accountability is great, but schools should not be judged by what students do on one test on one day in March."

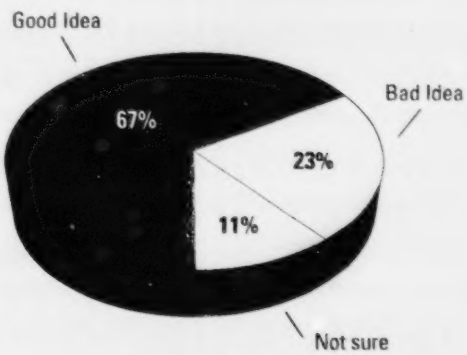
Given principals' mixed views on standardized testing, it is not surprising that they are divided and perhaps to some extent uncertain about the role testing should play in evaluating their own performance. Almost half of principals (48%) think it is a "bad idea" to hold principals accountable for the test scores in their own building, and 44% say that "unreasonable standards and accountability" are driving talented and committed principals out of the field. At the same time, a third of principals say that it is a "good idea" to hold principals accountable for student scores (34%) and that higher standards and accountability lead "the more talented and committed principals to stay and drive out the less able ones" (34%). On both of these questions, roughly one in five principals say they aren't sure.

Can School Leaders "Deliver" Results?

Research by Public Agenda shows that teachers voice strong support for using standardized tests to identify students who are struggling and to guarantee that a high school diploma represents a command of at least minimum basic skills (as do strong majorities of parents). But a majority of teachers also say the schools are putting too much emphasis on standardized testing.[10] In the hundreds of interviews Public Agenda has conducted with teachers over the years, again and again we hear them say it's unfair to expect them to raise student achievement without smaller classes, adequate resources and dependable parental support.

Should Principals Be Held Accountable for Test Scores?

Generally speaking, do you think it is a good idea or a bad idea to hold principals accountable for student standardized test scores at the building level?



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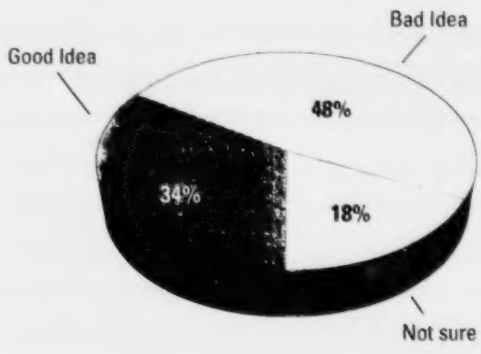

PRINCIPALS

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Superintendents and principals may not view standards and accountability as the most troublesome or dispiriting aspects of their jobs but, to a certain degree, they echo the teachers' apprehension. Administrators feel they are expected to deliver rising test scores, yet many say they do not have the support they need to do their jobs. Administrators feel strongly that they haven't been given some key tools to make schools better, namely the power to reward good teachers and remove bad ones.

"Accountability is great, but schools should not be judged by what students do on one test on one day in March."

— Principal

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CHAPTER FOUR: MAKING ENDS MEET

Politics and bureaucracy are the main irritants for school leaders, but traditional concerns about funding also receive attention – especially the pressures of unfunded mandates. Although superintendents and principals say funding is a problem, most say they can manage with the budgets they have.

Making ends meet is a perennial challenge for any organizational leader, and school leaders are no exception. Majorities of superintendents (66%) and principals (53%) say insufficient funding is a more pressing problem for them than lack of parental involvement, ineffective administrators or poor teacher quality. As one survey participant commented, "Much of the problems are directly due to money."

Managing Money Is "Absolutely Essential"

Like leaders in any major enterprise, public school administrators are evaluated on their ability to meet their goals while staying within budget. Large majorities of superintendents (85%) and principals (77%) think it's an "absolutely essential" quality of a good leader to be able to use money effectively and efficiently. When principals rate their district's superintendent on this quality, 60% say they are happy with their own superintendent's ability to properly manage district funds. Superintendents, however, are not as sanguine about principals: two in three say their principals need improvement in this area (54% of superintendents say their principals should be a little better, and 13% a lot better).

Too Many Mandates, Too Little Money

Clearly, individuals who take on a superintendency or principalship aren't naïve about the challenges the job entails – district politics, competing priorities, copious mandates and tight budgets come with the territory. But the survey findings suggest that, for many school leaders, existing budgets simply have not caught up to new spending demands. Responsibilities have increased, and more and more mandates seem to come down from above without corresponding funds to carry them out, according to 88% of superintendents and 83% of principals. One principal wrote: "The major issue to me is the amount of 'stuff' not directly related to educating students which is being dumped on the schools with no additional funding. We are expected to do a better job of teaching students with less time, more pressure and the expectation that we [should] deal with numerous societal problems."

Concerns about Special Ed

Special education – which both defenders and detractors have criticized for its maze of rules and regulations – is a case in point. According to 84% of superintendents and 65% of principals in school districts across the country, special education issues exact an inordinate amount of district money and other resources. Many of the handwritten comments

Funding Is a Top Problem

Which of the following do you think is the most pressing issue facing your school district these days?

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Insufficient funding	66%	53%
— OR —		
Lack of parental involvement	8%	22%
— OR —		
Lack of strong and talented administrators	7%	4%
— OR —		
Poor teacher quality	4%	4%

we received from survey participants specifically pointed to special education as a vexing issue.

"Our real problem," one principal wrote, "is the time, money and attention devoted to special education at the expense of regular education. No one wants to lock people away and not educate them, but when twenty cents of every dollar is spent on special ed, it is too much." Another principal commented: "Tenure, then unions, and special education have been the biggest problems I have experienced in my thirty years in public schools. Special education is a huge detractor for public schools!"

We Can Handle It

Despite the stresses and strains funding issues seem to cause, few school leaders see them as seriously undermining their ability to do their jobs. Just 18% of superintendents and 13% of principals consider lack of funding to be "such a critical problem that only minimal progress can be made." More than seven in ten superintendents (73%) and principals (72%) say they "can make progress" given what they have. In the same vein, 49% of superintendents (and 64% of principals) say that "dealing with funding and budgeting" got about the right amount of their attention last year. Forty-three percent of superintendents (and only 21% of principals) report that it got more attention than it deserved.

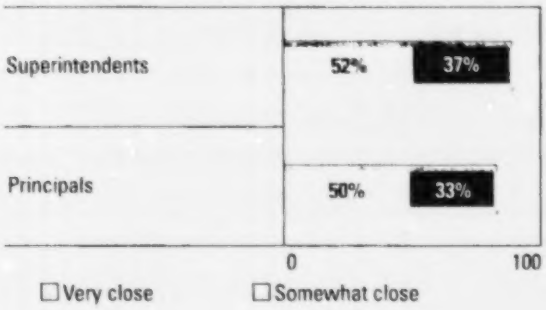
With a little ingenuity and knowledge of the system, most superintendents and principals across the country say they can get their jobs done given the resources they have. What school leaders seem to be saying is that funding will, of course, continue to be a top concern – especially when it comes to unfunded mandates such as special education – but it would be misguided to think that increasing funds would be the most effective solution to school leadership problems.

"Funding is not the main factor hindering student achievement," stated one respondent. As we have seen in previous chapters, shielding administrators from political pressures and eliminating red tape would go a lot further to improve their ability to provide leadership to their schools.

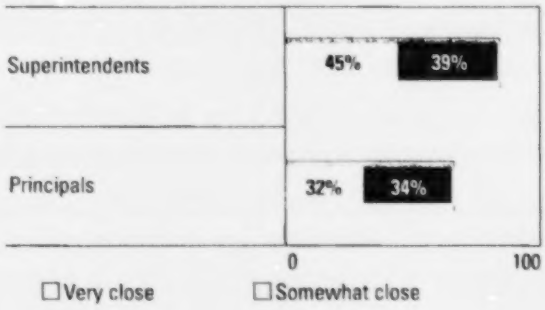
Mandates and Special Ed

Here are some problems or challenges that school administrators may face.
Please indicate how close each comes to describing your own experiences in your district.

My district has experienced an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources necessary to fulfill them.



Too often, administrators are obligated to spend a disproportional amount of money and other resources on special education issues.



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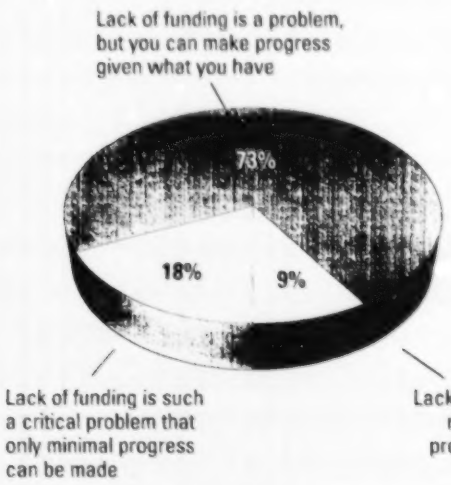
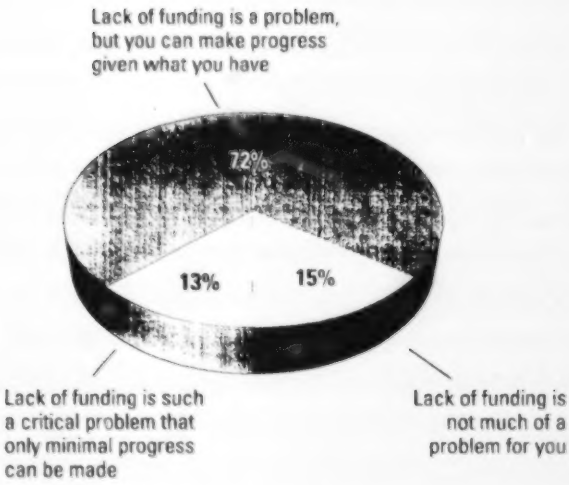
Making Ends Meet

When it comes to your budget, would you say that:


Lack of funding is a problem, but you can make progress given what you have
73%
18%
9%
Lack of funding is such a critical problem that only minimal progress can be made
Lack of funding is not much of a problem for you

SUPERINTENDENTS


Lack of funding is a problem, but you can make progress given what you have
72%
13%
15%
Lack of funding is such a critical problem that only minimal progress can be made
Lack of funding is not much of a problem for you

PRINCIPALS

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CHAPTER FIVE: QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

Although many education experts predict a nationwide shortage of school administrators, few superintendents and principals say this is currently a pressing worry in their own districts. Superintendents do, however, express concerns about the skills of their current principals, and many acknowledge difficulties in finding effective, well-qualified principal applicants.

Flip through the pages of *Education Week*, and you will be hard pressed not to find a story on the looming shortage of qualified school leaders. On Capitol Hill, several senators have put forward legislation to address the leadership shortage. And just last year, the American Association of School Administrators released two conflicting studies on the status of the superintendency: one found no convincing evidence of a pending shortage, the other deemed it a crisis.[11]

A shortage of superintendents and principals could be a serious hurdle for the nation's schools to overcome, and education policymakers have performed an important service by alerting the country to what may in fact turn out to be a crisis. But when superintendents and principals are asked to report on what is happening at this time in their own districts, only handfuls identify a lack of administrators as the most pressing problem they currently face. As we will see in this chapter, the immediate problem is less one of quantity and more one of quality.

Shortages Haven't Hit Home

According to superintendents and principals, a shortage of applicants to fill principal openings is a relatively minor problem – at least at this time. Fifty-nine percent of superintendents and 70% of principals say there is currently "no shortage of principals" in their district. Superintendents in large urban districts, however, are somewhat more likely to experience an insufficient supply of applicants – 61% say they are experiencing at least a somewhat serious shortage of principals. Turnover among principals in individual districts is also not considered a serious concern (67% of superintendents; 68% of principals).

Nor do shortages or stability appear to be pressing concerns when it comes to superintendents. Relatively few school leaders say superintendent turnover is a serious problem in their own district (22% of superintendents; 21% of principals). And despite the headlines about superintendent turnover in the nation's big cities, just 30% of large urban superintendents say it is a serious problem for them. To the degree that they see a widespread shortage, superintendents are evenly split between defining it as "a shortage depending on the size and location of the districts" (47%) and "a general, nationwide shortage" (48%).

The Principal Shortage

Is your district currently facing:

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
A severe shortage of principals	3%	3%
— OR —		
A somewhat serious shortage of principals	37%	25%
— OR —		
No shortage of principals	59%	70%

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Lukewarm Grades for Principals

But although few school leaders say they face a serious supply problem, the survey does suggest widespread concerns among superintendents about the qualifications and talent of their current principals, as well as the candidates they interview for new positions.

Superintendents' assessment of their own group of principals is notably unenthusiastic. Just over half (52%) say they are "happy" with the job their current principals are doing overall, and just under half say things should be better (41% a little better and 7% a lot better). Large urban district superintendents – perhaps predictably, given the unique challenges they face – are even less likely to say they are "happy" with their principals' performance (41%). One superintendent wrote, "Schools are changing and the needs of children are changing. Principals need to be better prepared to understand the complexities of managing a school – especially schools with high poverty."

The Superintendent Shortage

When it comes to the supply of superintendents in general, do you think there is:

	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
A general, nationwide shortage	48%	29%
— OR —		
A shortage depending on the size and location of the districts	47%	56%
— OR —		
Virtually no shortage	3%	8%

Superintendents' dissatisfaction with principals is even more pronounced when they are asked to rate their current corps on 13 specific leadership qualities. Barely one in three superintendents say they are "happy" with their district's principals when it comes to recruiting talented teachers (36%), knowing how to make tough decisions (35%), delegating responsibility and authority (34%), involving teachers in decisions (33%), and using money effectively (32%). On only a single measure out of 13 does a majority of superintendents say they are "happy" with their principals: putting the interests of children above all else (65%).*

"We're Just Not Inundated with Great Applicants"

Superintendents are also skeptical about the quality of new principals they see coming into the profession: only one in three (33%) superintendents say quality has improved in recent years (36% say it has stayed about the same and 29% say it has gotten worse). "I hope this survey will create more interest in the principalship job – we have a real shortage of qualified people," wrote one superintendent.

And to hear superintendents tell it, finding qualified candidates is a difficult task that is often exacerbated by factors outside of their control. For example, almost nine in ten superintendents agree (44% strongly and 44% somewhat) that wealthier districts have an enormous advantage when competing for talent. One superintendent commented: "We just are not inundated with great applicants out there. [If] you're working for a premier school district, it's going to pay a premier salary, and you may get some good people there. But the typical school district out there isn't going to be able to pull in some wonderful savior." And the reality, according to six in ten superintendents, is that "you sometimes have to settle and take what you can get" when looking for a principal (11% strongly agree, 49% somewhat agree).

** Principals' assessments of their own superintendent are considerably more positive.* *See page 25.*

Superintendents Give Principals Mediocre Ratings

How happy are you with the principals in your district when it comes to:

% of superintendents who say they are "happy" with the principals in their district	SUPERINTENDENTS
Putting the interests of children above all else	65%
Recruiting and developing a talented corps of teachers	36%
Having the ability to make tough decisions	35%
Delegating responsibility and authority to staff	34%
Involving teachers in developing policies and priorities	33%
Using money effectively and efficiently	32%
Communicating a clear educational vision and priorities	29%
Being very good public speakers and having good media skills	28%
Motivating and inspiring st...	25%
Identifying and nurturing talented potential administrators	24%
Making effective use of technology to manage operations	22%
Knowing how to build support among and manage the power of different interest groups	19%
Holding staff accountable for getting results	18%

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Principals Give Superintendents Better Ones

How happy are you with your district superintendent when it comes to:

% of principals who say they are "happy" with their superintendent	PRINCIPALS
Putting the interests of children above all else	65%
Having the ability to make tough decisions	61%
Using money effectively and efficiently	60%
Being very good public speakers and having good media skills	60%
Holding staff accountable for getting results	59%
Delegating responsibility and authority to staff	58%
Communicating a clear educational vision and priorities	57%
Making effective use of technology to manage operations	48%
Knowing how to build support among and manage the power of different interest groups	48%
Recruiting and developing a talented corps of teachers	48%
Involving teachers in developing policies and priorities	42%
Identifying and nurturing talented potential administrators	41%
Motivating and inspiring staff	36%

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CHAPTER SIX: ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TALENTED LEADERS

School leaders say better working conditions are necessary to attract well-qualified superintendents and principals, and they are enthusiastic about a variety of proposals to improve leadership. Most feel strongly that the best leaders come from inside education, not from fields like business or the military.

Improve Working Conditions

Given their complaints about politics and bureaucracy, teacher tenure and funding, it is hardly surprising that improving the work environment would become a primary focus for administrators. Asked to choose among three items as the most promising for improving the quality of school leadership, pluralities of both groups choose improving working conditions (superintendents, 44%; principals, 43%) over revamping training programs or increasing salaries. As one principal wrote, "The principal's job is almost overwhelming. My desk is never clear of obligations. Constant interruptions from parents, teachers, etc., add to the stress of the day…Is it any wonder that we finally burn out? My family suffers from the demands of my job."

In fact, more than eight in ten administrators who participated in this survey say that the enormous demands of their job have forced them to make serious compromises in terms of their family and personal life (84% of superintendents; 83% of principals).

Similarly, many also think they deserve more recognition for the work they do. Less than half of superintendents (48%), and even fewer principals (37%), say they are happy with the respect and appreciation they get for the job they do. As one principal commented, "Most intelligent, capable people I know would not take the job as they could make more money and have much more leisure time with family doing something else."

Demands of the Job

The strain of their day-to-day working conditions not only heightens burnout among today's school leaders but may also dissuade talented educators from applying for administrative positions. Overwhelming majorities of superintendents (88%) and principals (92%) agree that the time and responsibilities demanded by their job discourage many talented people from pursuing it as a career. On the other hand, it may be a bit of good news to know that many principals view the superintendency as an attractive career option. A significant proportion (44%) say they would seriously consider becoming a superintendent or central office administrator in the next few years.

More than eight in ten administrators say that the enormous demands of their job have forced them to make serious compromises in terms of their family and personal life.

Kudos for Many Proposals

While the bulk of school leaders say that better working conditions are their best shot at improving the quality of leadership, they are also open to many other, more concrete ideas. Since there are currently so many policy proposals on the table, the survey asked school leaders to rate a variety of measures.

Topping the list of "very effective" approaches to improving school leadership are: making it much easier to remove bad teachers (superintendents, 73%; principals, 69%); improving pay and prestige (superintendents, 59%; principals, 65%); improving

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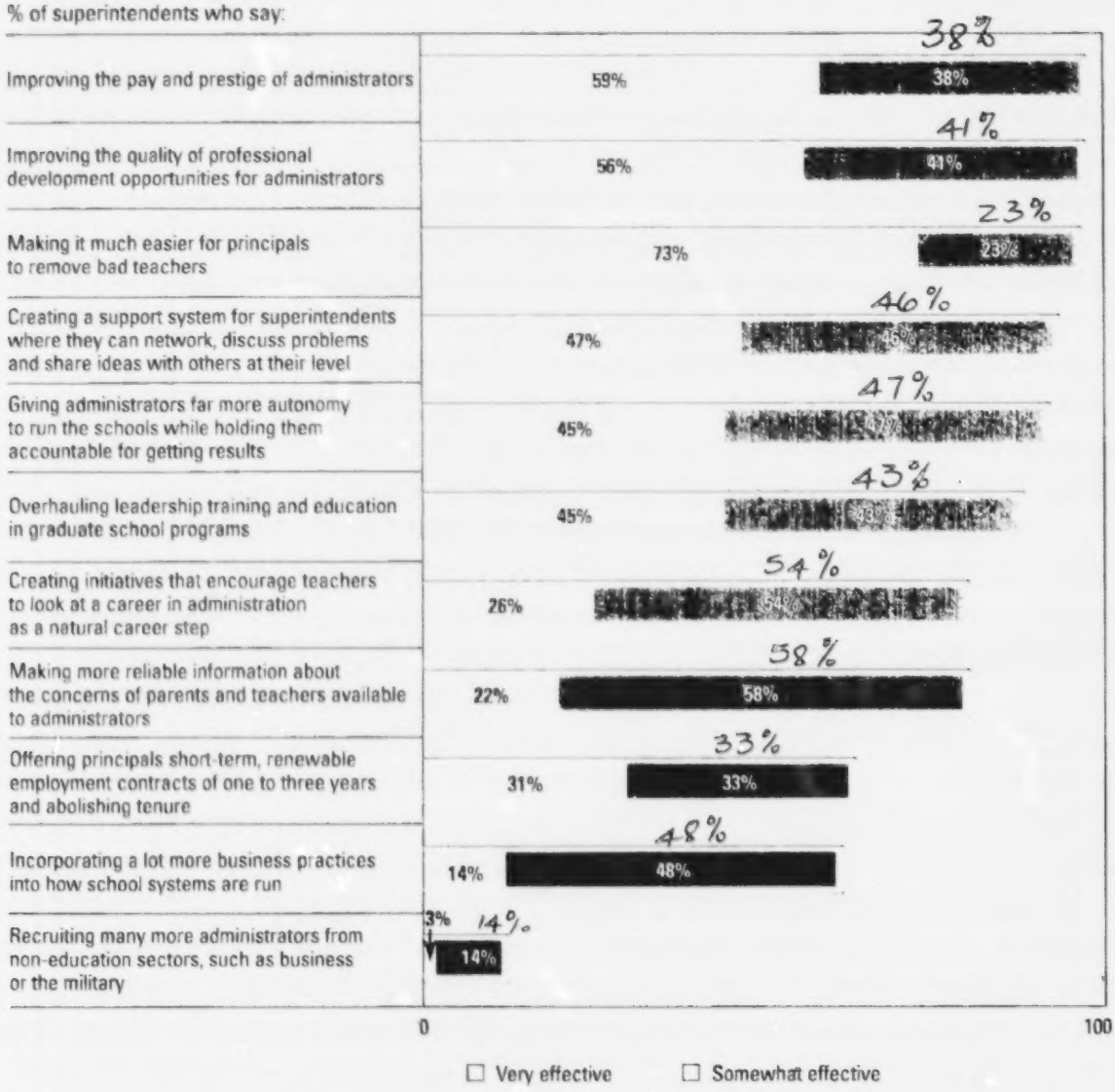
Superintendents' Top-Rated Ideas to Improve Leadership

How effective do you think each of these approaches would be to improve leadership in the nation's schools?


% of superintendents who say:
Improving the pay and prestige of administrators
59%
38%
38%
Improving the quality of professional development opportunities for administrators
56%
41%
41%
Making it much easier for principals to remove bad teachers
73%
23%
23%
Creating a support system for superintendents where they can network, discuss problems and share ideas with others at their level
47%
46%
Giving administrators far more autonomy to run the schools while holding them accountable for getting results
45%
47%
Overhauling leadership training and education in graduate school programs
45%
43%
Creating initiatives that encourage teachers to look at a career in administration as a natural career step
26%
54%
Making more reliable information about the concerns of parents and teachers available to administrators
22%
58%
Offering principals short-term, renewable employment contracts of one to three years and abolishing tenure
31%
33%
Incorporating a lot more business practices into how school systems are run
14%
48%
Recruiting many more administrators from non-education sectors, such as business or the military
3%
14%
14%
0
100
Very effective
Somewhat effective

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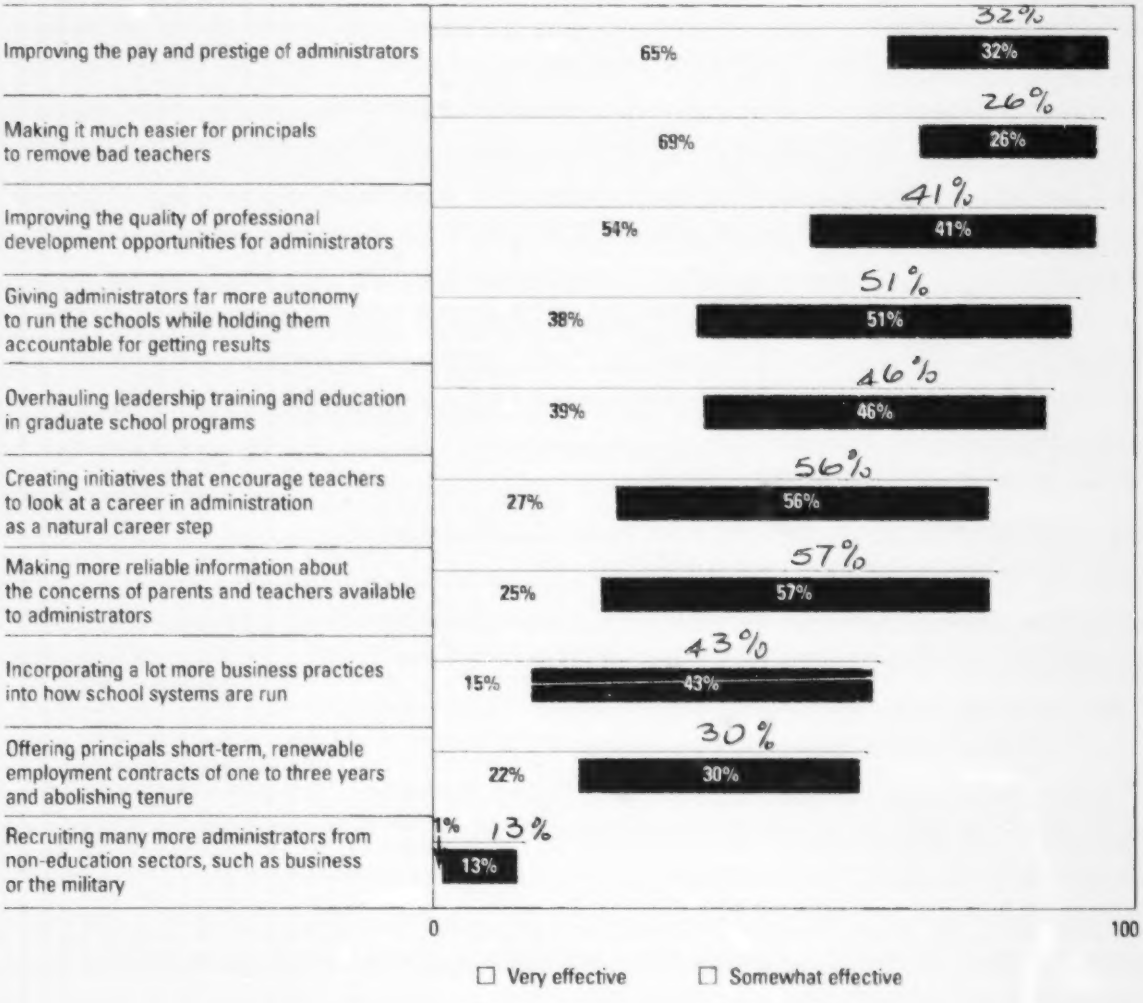
Principals' Top-Rated Solutions

How effective do you think each of these approaches would be to improve leadership in the nation's schools?



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professional development (superintendents, 56%; principals, 54%); giving administrators more autonomy (superintendents, 45%, principals, 38%); and overhauling leadership programs in schools of education (superintendents, 45%; principals, 39%). As illustrated in the table on the previous page, there are a wide variety of other ideas that administrators consider to be at least somewhat effective for improving school leadership.

Don't Go Outside the Field

But one idea proves particularly unpopular: there is overwhelming resistance to bringing in leaders from outside education. Only 3% of superintendents and 1% of principals consider this a "very effective" solution to the school leadership problem. Most school leaders consider it a bad idea (59% of superintendents; 70% of principals). And virtually all (91% of both superintendents and principals) say that most school districts are better off hiring superintendents who are experienced educators, rather than leaders from outside the field.

As one superintendent wrote, "Some districts require new and different thinking but many of these superintendents have problems because they don't understand education." Another wrote: "There is some thought that business professionals could operate a school system better. We constantly look at schools under a microscope. Let's do the same for businesses. What would we say about the leadership at Firestone? Ford? Chrysler? Businesses can pick their raw materials, but schools work with everyone who comes through the door."

Small minorities say that tapping capable non-educators is a good idea for failing districts (20% of superintendents; 13% of principals), but virtually no one says that it's a good idea for most districts.

A Commitment to Homegrown Talent

Experts talk about the need for districts to grow leadership from within, and these frontline leaders say they are already doing so. More than seven in ten superintendents (72%) say they are inclined to promote from within their district, rather than hire seasoned and experienced leadership from other districts (17%). This commitment to homegrown talent is not just talk: 84% of superintendents say they are actively and deliberately grooming someone on their staff for a more senior leadership position. Most principals (67%) say they are doing the same in their schools. An Ohio superintendent described it like this: "You have to go after people. The skill of a good superintendent is to identify people. As you see them at meetings, you see them working on different things, you start to build a little file folder on that person in your head." And a principal who participated in the survey described what's happening in his school: "I am a strong advocate of encouraging teachers to seek out leadership roles. Two principals and three curriculum coordinators have come from our building over the past five years. We need to support our teachers as future leaders."

> ***"There is some thought that business professionals could operate a school system better. We constantly look at schools under a microscope. Let's do the same for businesses. What would we say about the leadership at Firestone? Ford? Chrysler?"***
>
> *—Superintendent*

Like any professional would, school leaders resent the notion that their experience in the field is a liability rather than an asset. Two in three superintendents (68%), for example, agree that it's virtually impossible to be a successful superintendent without first being a principal. And an even higher proportion of principals (90%) agree that principals first need to be teachers.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

Despite the challenges, most school leaders find a great deal of satisfaction in the work they do, but there are some complaints. Superintendents often feel isolated, and both superintendents and principals believe that professional training is too often impractical and unfocused.

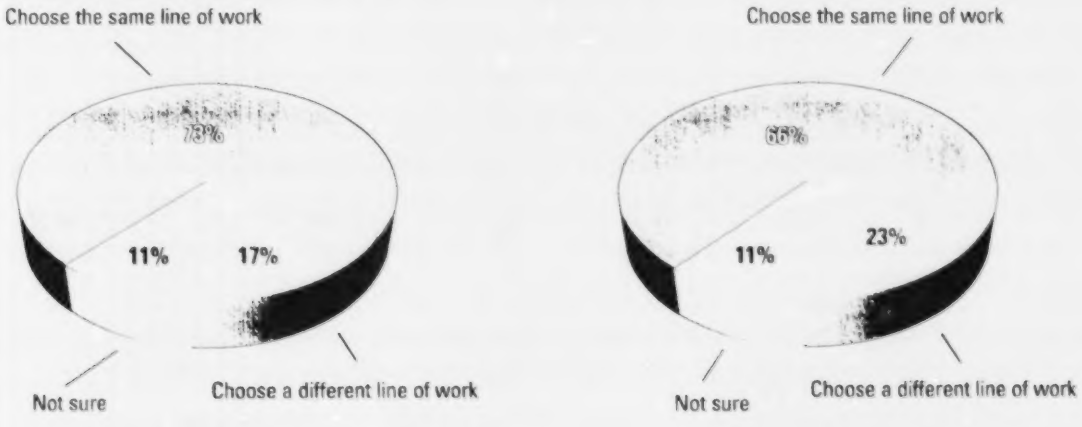
Notwithstanding their concerns and complaints, most school leaders are content in their jobs. Large majorities say they are happy with their jobs (superintendents, 69%; principals, 63%). What's more, large majorities say they would choose the same line of work again if they had the chance (superintendents, 73%; principals, 66%). As one superintendent put it, "I'll get a lot of superintendents together, and we'll sit around and we'll complain, and then somebody asks the question, 'Do you like your job?' Everybody will say, 'I love it.'" And a principal wrote, "Being a principal is a hard, demanding job. [But] overall, the rewards far outweigh the negatives. I love my work."

It's Lonely at the Top

But according to superintendents, theirs can be a lonely and isolating profession. Unlike teachers and principals who regularly interact with their peers, superintendents rarely have colleagues nearby to rely on in a jam, or to vent to when something goes wrong. More than six in ten superintendents (63%) agree that "the superintendency is an isolating profession that affords few chances to discuss problems and share advice with colleagues." And almost half (47%) say that creating a support system for superintendents where they can network and discuss ideas with others at their level would be "very effective" in improving school leadership at the national level.

No Regrets

If you were just starting out and could choose your life's work all over again, would you:



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Professional Development: Important but Unfocused

Given this need for support, it is not surprising that school administrators regard professional development as a high priority. In personal interviews, school leaders stressed that effective, satisfied school leaders are those who nurture their skills and continue to learn. Improving professional development proves to be one of the most popular ideas for improving school leadership: 56% of superintendents and 54% of principals consider it a "very effective" idea.

Most school leaders say that the type of professional development that would most help them would focus on the latest research on student learning and effective educational practices (57% of superintendents; 56% of principals). Fewer favor programs that concentrate on practical training in how to deal with problem situations, such as irate parents, frustrated teachers and student violence (24% of superintendents; 35% of principals). And even fewer are interested in new ideas and management techniques from leaders in non-education fields (16% of superintendents; 6% of principals). As things stand now, majorities say that "too much of the professional development offered to administrators is impractical and focuses on the wrong things" (60% of superintendents; 66% of principals).

Ed Schools: Create Practitioners, Not Researchers

Many school leaders say that education school graduate programs leave much to be desired, especially when it comes to providing a better balance between the theoretical and practical. As one administrator put it, "Practical vs. theory is still a problem in training." Most agree that the typical leadership programs are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school district (superintendents, 80%; principals, 69%).

Subsequently, many believe that "overhauling leadership training and education in graduate school programs" would be a "very effective" way to improve leadership (superintendents, 45%; principals, 39%). One principal wrote that "Administrators come out of many of these programs and don't understand how intense that position is going to be." Another principal commented: "If you want more qualified superintendents, change the focus of prep programs from making researchers to creating practitioners that can read and apply the research."

Training Misses the Mark

% of respondents who say:	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
The typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school district	80%	69%
The superintendency is an isolating profession that affords few chances to discuss problems and share advice with colleagues	63%	N/A
Too much of the professional development offered to administrators is impractical and focuses on the wrong things	60%	66%
Improving the quality of professional development opportunities for administrators would be a very effective way to improve school leadership	56%	54%

AFTERWORD

By Deborah Wadsworth

The education reform movement, which has gained momentum over the past two decades, has moved its spotlight urgently from one area to another in an effort to focus attention on all aspects of public education in need of improvement.

Early on, reformers illuminated the lack of skills among many high school graduates. Thereafter, they highlighted conditions in classrooms and schools, gaps in curricula, and eventually failings in teacher education and – to some degree – within the profession itself. Of late, attention has come to rest squarely on the need to raise standards in school districts across the nation and to hold all those involved accountable.

Boot Camps for Principals

As discussions of accountability have gained currency, they have inexorably led to the doorstep of those ultimately responsible for the public's schools – the nation's school superintendents and principals. In late September, *Education Week* heralded the start of a two-year special project which would examine leadership in education. "Study after study," the article began, "shows that a crucial factor in determining whether schools – and school districts – succeed or fail is the quality and stability of their leadership."

The *Education Week* piece continues to describe the boot camps and academies that have proliferated for superintendents and principals, and the professional development opportunities and management training that have sprung up overnight. The explicit goal of these and many other such endeavors is to address what education reformers have defined as one of their chief concerns – the need to strengthen the quality of those presently in the trenches and to provide crash courses for the "would-be leaders" needed to contend with shortages they believe are inevitable.

The Art of the Possible

Concerns about projected shortages, management skills and fiscal matters are indeed serious; they are concerns not only of reformers but of school leaders themselves. But as *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game* makes clear, these concerns are neither the most prevalent, nor even the most worrisome to those presently administering the nation's schools and school districts. As in other Public Agenda studies, this research draws a road map of what is on the minds of practicing superintendents and principals. Not surprisingly, the findings point to some concerns that one scarcely hears mentioned in the leadership debate. More than pressure from the standards movement, or unhappiness over salaries, or worry over the rapid turnover of personnel, school leaders say the bane of their existence is the pervasiveness of politics and bureaucracy. To hear them tell it, glitches, hurdles, delays and second-guessing seem to bedevil even the most ordinary of tasks.

More than pressure from standards, or unhappiness over salaries, or worry over the rapid turnover of personnel, school leaders say the bane of their existence is the pervasiveness of politics and bureaucracy.

Again and again, in one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and in responses to our survey questions, superintendents and principals describe the frustration they feel as they attempt to focus on educational matters while being nibbled to death daily by the demands of cumbersome local, state and federal mandates; threats of litigation brought by parents or teachers; attacks from unions and other special interests; and a mind-boggling array of political tangles and bureaucratic encumbrances. They say these make it difficult indeed to respond in commonsensical ways to the real needs of youngsters. And that's just the beginning.

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Circumventing the System

Rather than having an environment that is conducive to developing and carrying out their plans to help students achieve more, their days are absorbed doing battle with bureaucracies. Most say they have to go around the system to get things done.

Politics and bureaucracy are their nemeses. And while superintendents and principals appreciate and even call for more professional development, there appears to be a mismatch between the visions of the "new profession" being offered by reformers and the chief problems these leaders face daily. I would guess that it is hard for many of them to focus clearly on the possibility of reinventing leadership while they are desperately juggling the countless details and distractions that demand their attention.

Based on this research, few superintendents and principals envision workshops and summer courses to help them manage this morass. Rather, one senses a yearning to be free of the kind of harassment that consumes them, sapping much-needed energy and far too much valuable time.

A Need to Cut Red Tape?

Corporate America and leaders in Washington have understood this dilemma all too well; many have focused squarely on the need to eliminate unnecessary mandates and unreasonable bureaucratic rules and regulations that tend to preclude desperately-needed cooperation and coordination. School administrators' most urgent plea is to be heard and then be helped in reforming the systems in which they operate. To achieve the educational goals the nation is calling for, superintendents and principals say they need to be free to pay attention to the real business at hand.

Superintendents and principals agree that they should be held accountable for getting results, but, at the end of the day, their frustration is exacerbated by still one more serious obstacle that diminishes their sense of efficacy. Far more than control over money or discipline, they identify their inability to reward good teachers and remove bad ones as one of the most troubling obstacles of all.

Working with Your Hands Tied

School leaders say their power to reward or punish – to deliver the carrot or the stick – is sorely limited. In their view, it's unreasonable to hold them accountable without giving them far more autonomy to compensate outstanding teachers and/or to weed out the few who are truly incompetent – tenured or not. Just as teachers routinely cite circumstances beyond their control – societal problems or the lack of parental involvement – as daunting obstacles to their ability to improve youngsters' learning, administrators make clear that they, too, are often working with their hands tied behind their backs.

A Spontaneous Concern about Tenure

The debate over tenure resurfaces from time to time, and the spontaneous expression of deep concern it provokes among superintendents and principals suggests that now may be the moment to give this issue some serious attention once again.

In spite of all the concerns these administrators express, what is ultimately remarkable in *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game* is their optimism and confidence. Large majorities of superintendents and principals say they gain deep satisfaction from their job and would choose the same line of work again if offered the chance. Moreover, they are by and large a self-assured group, not at all naïve about the challenges the job entails. The vast majority of superintendents and principals in this study have had five or more years' experience in their role, and they are confident that they can make a difference, even in the toughest of schools. "Given the right leadership," the vast majority say, "even the most troubled school districts can be turned around."

In spite of all the concerns these administrators express, what is ultimately remarkable is their optimism and confidence.

SUPPORTING TABLES

TABLE ONE: Views on School Leadership

Thinking about your own experiences in the public schools, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/ Strongly	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/ Strongly
Behind every great school is a great principal	76 23	1 *	56 42	2 *
To be a good [superintendent / principal], you must stick to a few core goals and avoid getting sidetracked by peripheral initiatives	49 44	6 1	42 50	8 1
Keeping up with all the local, state and federal mandates handed down to the schools takes up way too much time	39 49	10 2	39 47	10 4
It's virtually impossible to be a successful [superintendent / principal] without previous experience as a [principal / teacher]	31 37	17 15	66 24	7 3
The superintendency is an isolating profession that affords few chances to discuss problems and share advice with colleagues	20 43	24 14	N/A	N/A
In very large [districts / schools], it's far more important to have excellent management skills than to have instructional knowledge	20 34	23 18	14 29	24 27
Too much professional development offered to administrators is impractical and focuses on the wrong things	13 47	30 9	17 49	20 11

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

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TABLE TWO: Challenges of School Leadership

Here are some problems that school administrators may face. Please indicate how close each of the following comes to describing your own experience in your district.

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	Very close/ Somewhat close	Not too close/ Not close at all	Very close/ Somewhat close	Not too close/ Not close at all
My district has experienced an enormous increase in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources necessary to fulfill them	52 / 37	9 / 2	50 / 33	12 / 4
Managing harsh public criticism and political heat has become a routine part of being a school administrator these days	46 / 35	15 / 4	37 / 34	20 / 9
Too often, administrators are obliged to spend a disproportional amount of money and other resources on special education issues	45 / 39	12 / 4	32 / 34	23 / 11
The enormous demands of this job have forced me to make serious compromises in terms of my family and personal life	44 / 40	11 / 5	48 / 35	12 / 6
The typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school district	38 / 42	13 / 3	29 / 40	18 / 7
The public's concern about school violence has forced my [district / school] to spend much more time on school security issues at the expense of other priorities	12 / 31	37 / 20	7 / 27	40 / 26
My [principals / superintendent] and I are constantly stepping on each other's toes — responsibilities are poorly defined and boundaries are unclear	1 / 6	32 / 62	3 / 6	20 / 69

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

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TABLE THREE: How They Spend Their Time

Thinking back over the last school year, please indicate how much of your attention each of the following items got. Did each get more attention than it deserved, less attention than it deserved, or about the right amount of your attention?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Legal issues and litigation		
Got more attention	50	26
Got less attention	7	8
Got about the right amount	43	62
Parents with complaints or special interests		
Got more attention	48	45
Got less attention	2	1
Got about the right amount	50	54
Collective bargaining or other union issues		
Got more attention	43	21
Got less attention	6	9
Got about the right amount	51	63
Dealing with funding and budgeting		
Got more attention	43	21
Got less attention	8	15
Got about the right amount	49	64
District politics		
Got more attention	37	27
Got less attention	9	13
Got about the right amount	53	58
Students with discipline problems		
Got more attention	33	47
Got less attention	5	4
Got about the right amount	62	49
Improving student achievement		
Got more attention	28	29
Got less attention	27	27
Got about the right amount	44	43
Teacher quality and training		
Got more attention	16	16
Got less attention	34	36
Got about the right amount	50	46
Organized parent groups such as the PTA		
Got more attention	8	12
Got less attention	18	16
Got about the right amount	73	70
Conferences and professional meetings		
Got more attention	6	15
Got less attention	26	28
Got about the right amount	66	57

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

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TABLE FOUR: Autonomy on the Job

In each of the following areas, would you say that you have enough freedom and autonomy, that you need a little more, or that you need a lot more?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Purchasing supplies and services		
Have enough	82	63
Need a little more	14	27
Need a lot more	3	9
Dealing with student discipline		
Have enough	79	84
Need a little more	16	12
Need a lot more	5	4
Hiring teachers and other school staff		
Have enough	78	71
Need a little more	17	22
Need a lot more	6	8
Designing academic programs and curriculum		
Have enough	74	60
Need a little more	21	29
Need a lot more	4	10
Removing ineffective teachers from the classroom		
Have enough	28	32
Need a little more	25	26
Need a lot more	46	41
Having the capacity to reward outstanding teachers and staff		
Have enough	24	32
Need a little more	30	32
Need a lot more	46	35

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

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TABLE FIVE: Qualities of a Good Leader

There are many qualities to being a good leader, and some are more important than others. In your opinion, how important is it for a good leader to do each of the following?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Have the ability to make tough decisions		
Absolutely essential	96	95
Important but not essential	4	5
Not too important	*	-
Put the interests of children above all else		
Absolutely essential	95	94
Important but not essential	5	6
Not too important	*	*
Communicate a clear educational vision and priorities		
Absolutely essential	91	89
Important but not essential	9	11
Not too important	-	*
Use money effectively and efficiently		
Absolutely essential	85	77
Important but not essential	15	22
Not too important	*	*
Recruit and develop a talented corps of teachers		
Absolutely essential	82	86
Important but not essential	18	14
Not too important	1	*
Hold staff accountable for getting results		
Absolutely essential	82	80
Important but not essential	17	19
Not too important	*	1
Delegate responsibility and authority to staff		
Absolutely essential	76	71
Important but not essential	23	28
Not too important	1	1

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TABLE FIVE: Qualities of a Good Leader (continued)

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Motivate and inspire staff		
Absolutely essential	76	87
Important but not essential	24	13
Not too important	*	*
Know how to build support among and manage the power of different interest groups		
Absolutely essential	75	72
Important but not essential	24	27
Not too important	1	1
Identify and nurture talented potential administrators		
Absolutely essential	56	36
Important but not essential	42	54
Not too important	3	10
Be a very good public speaker and have good media skills		
Absolutely essential	49	36
Important but not essential	50	61
Not too important	1	2
Involve teachers in developing policies and priorities		
Absolutely essential	40	69
Important but not essential	55	30
Not too important	5	2
Make effective use of technology to manage operations		
Absolutely essential	30	35
Important but not essential	65	61
Not too important	6	4

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

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TABLE SIX: Superintendents and Principals Rate Each Other

Superintendents: When it comes to these qualities, how happy are you with the principals in your district?
Principals: When it comes to these qualities, how happy are you with your district superintendent?
Are you happy, should things be a little better, or should things be a lot better?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Putting the interests of children above all else		
Happy	65	65
Should be a little better	28	21
Should be a lot better	7	11
Recruiting and developing a talented corps of teachers		
Happy	36	48
Should be a little better	50	35
Should be a lot better	13	13
Having the ability to make tough decisions		
Happy	35	61
Should be a little better	45	25
Should be a lot better	20	11
Delegating responsibility and authority to staff		
Happy	34	58
Should be a little better	54	26
Should be a lot better	11	12
Involving teachers in developing policies and priorities		
Happy	33	42
Should be a little better	51	36
Should be a lot better	15	18
Using money effectively and efficiently		
Happy	32	60
Should be a little better	54	27
Should be a lot better	13	9
Communicating a clear educational vision and priorities		
Happy	29	57
Should be a little better	56	27
Should be a lot better	15	15

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TABLE SIX: Superintendents and Principals Rate Each Other (continued)

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Being a very good public speaker and having good media skills		
Happy	28	60
Should be a little better	59	28
Should be a lot better	13	10
Motivating and inspiring staff		
Happy	25	36
Should be a little better	60	38
Should be a lot better	15	24
Identifying and nurturing talented potential administrators		
Happy	24	41
Should be a little better	50	31
Should be a lot better	19	20
Making effective use of technology to manage operations		
Happy	22	48
Should be a little better	54	33
Should be a lot better	23	12
Knowing how to build support among and manage the power of different interest groups		
Happy	19	48
Should be a little better	57	32
Should be a lot better	23	16
Holding staff accountable for getting results		
Happy	18	59
Should be a little better	52	29
Should be a lot better	30	7

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

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TABLE SEVEN: Views on Hiring

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about hiring superintendents and principals.

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/ Strongly	Agree Strongly/ Somewhat	Disagree Somewhat/ Strongly
It's important to match the leadership style and strengths of an administrator to the needs and history of the particular school or district	59 37	4 1	51 43	5 1
When it comes to hiring talented administrators, wealthier districts have an enormous advantage simply because they can offer bigger salaries	44 44	11 1	49 40	7 1
The time and responsibilities demanded by the superintendency/principalship discourage many talented people from pursuing it as a career	44 44	8 3	54 38	6 1
When hiring new employees, it's often more valuable to rely on the opinion of people you trust than to rely on resumes and other formal qualifications	41 48	9 2	38 48	10 3
Too many school boards would rather hire a superintendent they can control rather than someone with a strong track record and proven leadership skills	24 41	22 6	31 36	21 4
When trying to fill a principal position, the reality is that you sometimes have to settle and take what you can get	11 49	24 15	N/A	N/A
There are far too many people and constituencies involved in the hiring process	9 36	39 14	11 35	39 12

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

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TABLE EIGHT: Expectations and Evaluations

In general, would you say the expectations and responsibilities for [insert item] are clearly defined, should things be a little better, or should things be a lot better?

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Expectations and responsibilities for principals in your district:		
Are clearly defined	60	56
Things should be a little better	37	34
Things should be a lot better	3	10
Expectations and responsibilities for your position as superintendent:		
Are clearly defined	60	N/A
Things should be a little better	34	N/A
Things should be a lot better	6	N/A

In general, would you say...

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS	PRINCIPALS
Principals in your district are evaluated by criteria that are fair and consistently applied	85	62
— **OR** —		
Principals are too often evaluated in an unfair or subjective manner	11	27
As superintendent, you are evaluated by criteria that are fair and consistently applied	66	N/A
— **OR** —		
You are too often evaluated in an unfair or subjective manner	25	N/A

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

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TABLE NINE: Solutions for Improving School Leadership

Here are some approaches for improving educational leadership in the public schools. Please indicate how effective you think each would be to improve leadership in the nation's schools.

% RESPONDING	SUPERINTENDENTS		PRINCIPALS	
	Very effective/ Somewhat effective	Not too effective/ Not effective at all	Very effective/ Somewhat effective	Not too effective/ Not effective at all
Making it much easier for principals to remove bad teachers—even those who have tenure	73 23	4 *	69 26	3 1
Improving the pay and prestige of administrators	59 38	3 *	65 32	3 *
Improving the quality of professional development opportunities for administrators	56 41	3 *	54 41	4 *
Creating a support system for superintendents where they can network, discuss problems and share ideas with others at their level	47 46	6 1	N/A	N/A
Giving administrators far more autonomy to run the schools while holding them accountable for getting results	45 47	6 1	38 51	10 1
Overhauling leadership training and education in graduate school programs	45 43	8 1	39 46	9 1
Offering principals short-term, renewable employment contracts of 1 to 3 years, and abolishing tenure	31 33	20 9	22 30	26 14
Creating initiatives that encourage teachers to look at a career in administration as a natural career step	26 54	16 3	27 56	14 2
Making more reliable information about the concerns of parents and teachers available to administrators	22 58	17 1	25 57	14 1
Incorporating a lot more business practices into how school systems are run	14 48	31 5	15 43	32 6
Recruiting many more administrators from non-education sectors, such as business or the military	3 14	47 31	1 13	43 35

Superintendents: n = 853 Principals: n = 909

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories; full reporting of all survey results may be found in the technical appendix for this study. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables. A dash indicates a finding of zero. An asterisk indicates a finding of less than .5%.

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ENDNOTES

1. See, for example:

   Farkas, Steve, et al. *Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools.* Public Agenda, 1999. National survey of 1,000 K-12 public school teachers. "Based upon your experience and observations at your school, how serious a problem is parents who refuse to hold their kids accountable for their behavior or academic performance?" Very serious: 31%; Somewhat serious: 50%; Not too serious: 16%; Not serious at all: 3%; Not sure: 1%.

   Farkas, Steve, et al. *A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why.* Public Agenda, 2000. National telephone survey of 664 K-12 public school teachers who have been in the profession five years or less. "Think of a school with low student achievement and parents who are not involved. Do you think bringing in exceptionally talented teachers could turn things around, or would this not be enough on its own?" Talented teachers could turn things around: 26%; This is not enough: 73%; Don't know: 1%.

2. Farkas, Steve, et al. *Just Waiting to Be Asked? A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement.* Public Agenda, 2001. National survey of 686 public school superintendents and 475 school board members. "Overall, how would you characterize relations between the school board and superintendent in recent times?" Mostly cooperative: superintendents 87%, board members 77%; Mostly contentious: superintendents 6%, board members 10%; About even: superintendents 7%, board members 12%; Not sure: superintendents*, board members 1%.

3. Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000.* National telephone survey of 604 K-12 public school teachers. "The tenure system should be changed to make it far easier to remove bad teachers. Is that very close, somewhat close, not too close, or not close at all to describing your school?" Very close: 30%; Somewhat close: 25%; Not too close: 15%; Not close at all: 24%; Don't know: 6%.

4. Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000.* National telephone survey of 604 K-12 public school teachers. "How many teachers in your school would you say don't belong in a classroom?" All: 2%; Most: 1%; Some: 7%; A few: 54%; None: 35%; Don't know: 2%.

5. Farkas, Steve, et al. *A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why.* Public Agenda, 2000. National telephone survey of 664 K-12 public school teachers who have been in the profession five years or less. "Generally speaking, do you think it is a good idea or a bad idea to pay higher salaries to teachers who agree to work in difficult schools with hard-to-educate children?" Good idea: 84%; Bad idea: 15%; Don't know: 1%.

6. Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2000.* National telephone survey of 604 K-12 public school teachers. "Some communities with underachieving kids are considering proposals to make educators more accountable by tying improvements in students' academic performance to financial incentives for teachers and principals. Generally speaking, do you think this is a good idea or bad idea?" Good idea: 22%; Bad idea: 76%; Don't know: 2%.

7. See, for example: Public Agenda, 1999. *Technical Appendix for Playing Their Parts: Parents and Teachers Talk about Parental Involvement in Public Schools.*

   "How serious have the following student problems been in the classes you have recently taught? Students who are disruptive in class." Very serious: 11%; Somewhat serious: 32%; Not too serious: 38%; Not serious at all: 20%. p. 50.

"How serious have the following student problems been in the classes you have recently taught? Students who try to get by with doing as little work as possible." Very serious: 26%; Somewhat serious: 43%; Not too serious: 24%; Not serious at all: 7%; Not sure: 1%. p. 52.

"How often do you come across parents who have so many personal problems that it affects their ability to properly care for their kids?" Often: 39%; Occasionally: 49%; Rarely: 11%; Not sure: 2%. p. 52.

8. Farkas, Steve, et al. *A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why.* Public Agenda, 2000. National telephone survey of 511 superintendents and principals. "Now I want to ask you which qualities are absolutely essential for being a really effective teacher, and which are less important. How about high standards and expectations for all students?" Absolutely essential: 87%; Important but not essential: 13%; Not too important:*

9. Farkas, Steve, et al. *Just Waiting to Be Asked? A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement.* Public Agenda, 2001. National survey of 686 public school superintendents and 475 school board members. "Which of the following do you think is the most pressing issue facing your school district today?" Raising student achievement: 53%; School funding: 32%; Teacher quality: 7%; Communication between the school and community residents: 4%; Other: 3%; Not sure: 1%. [Superintendents' responses]

10. Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2001.* National telephone survey of 601 K-12 public school teachers.

    "Standardized test scores are a good way to spot struggling students who need tutoring or summer school. Would you say you agree or disagree with this view? Is that strongly or somewhat?" Strongly agree: 24%; Somewhat agree: 43%; Somewhat disagree: 19%; Strongly disagree: 14%.

    "Before students are awarded a high school diploma, would you want your school district to require students to": Pass a basic skills test in reading, writing and math (56%); Pass a more challenging test showing they have learned at higher levels (26%); Requiring kids to pass a test is a bad idea (15%); Don't know: 2%.

    "The schools today place far too much emphasis on standardized test scores. Would you say you agree or disagree with this view? Is that strongly or somewhat?" Strongly agree: 53%; Somewhat agree: 30%; Somewhat disagree: 12%; Strongly disagree: 5%; Don't know: 1%.

11. Glass, Thomas E., Lars Bjork, and C. Cryss Brunner. *The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000: A Look at the Superintendent of Education in the New Millennium.* American Association of School Administrators, 2000.

    Cooper, Bruce S., Lance D. Fusarelli, and Vincent A. Carella. *Career Crisis in the School Superintendency? The Results of a National Survey.* American Association of School Administrators and The N ,tional Center for Educational Statistics, 2000.

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METHODOLOGY

Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game is based on mail surveys of national random samples of 853 public school superintendents and 909 public school principals. The surveys were preceded by numerous in-depth interviews with superintendents, principals and education experts, as well as one focus group with superintendents.

The Surveys

Questionnaires were mailed on July 27, 2001, to 2,500 superintendents and 4,000 principals. A reminder postcard was sent on August 2, followed by a second mailing of the questionnaires on August 9. All responses received through August 27 were accepted. The process netted responses from 853 superintendents, for a response rate of 34%; and 909 principals, for a response rate of 23%. The margin of error for both groups is +/– 3%; it is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

The random sample of superintendents was drawn from a comprehensive list of public school superintendents. Superintendents in school districts with 2,500 or more students were oversampled to ensure that they would be sufficiently represented in the sample; 82% of the students in the country attend schools in districts of this size, and 80% of superintendents in the sample are from these districts. The sample of principals was randomly drawn from a comprehensive list of public school principals.

The samples of superintendents and principals were provided by Market Data Retrieval, Inc. The surveys were fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The Questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instruments.

The Qualitative Research

Twenty-two individual interviews were conducted with superintendents, principals and other education experts, and one focus group was conducted with superintendents from Ohio. Insights from these interviews were important to the survey design. Quotes used in the report were drawn from the focus group and from comments written directly on the mail surveys.

RELATED PUBLIC AGENDA PUBLICATIONS/VIDEOS

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Reality Check 2001 Jean Johnson, Ann Duffett, Tony Foleno, Patrick Foley and Steve Farkas. "Reality Check" is the annual report on the progress of the academic-standards movement. Printed in the February 21, 2001, issue of *Education Week*. Available online at www.publicagenda.org.

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A Lot to Be Thankful For: What Parents Want Children to Learn about America Steve Farkas and Jean Johnson with Ann Duffett and Joanna McHugh. This study investigates native-born and foreign-born parents' beliefs on whether a set of "American values" should be taught to kids by the public schools and what this would mean. 1998. Price: $10.00 Technical Appendix: $40.00 ISBN 1-889483-58-3

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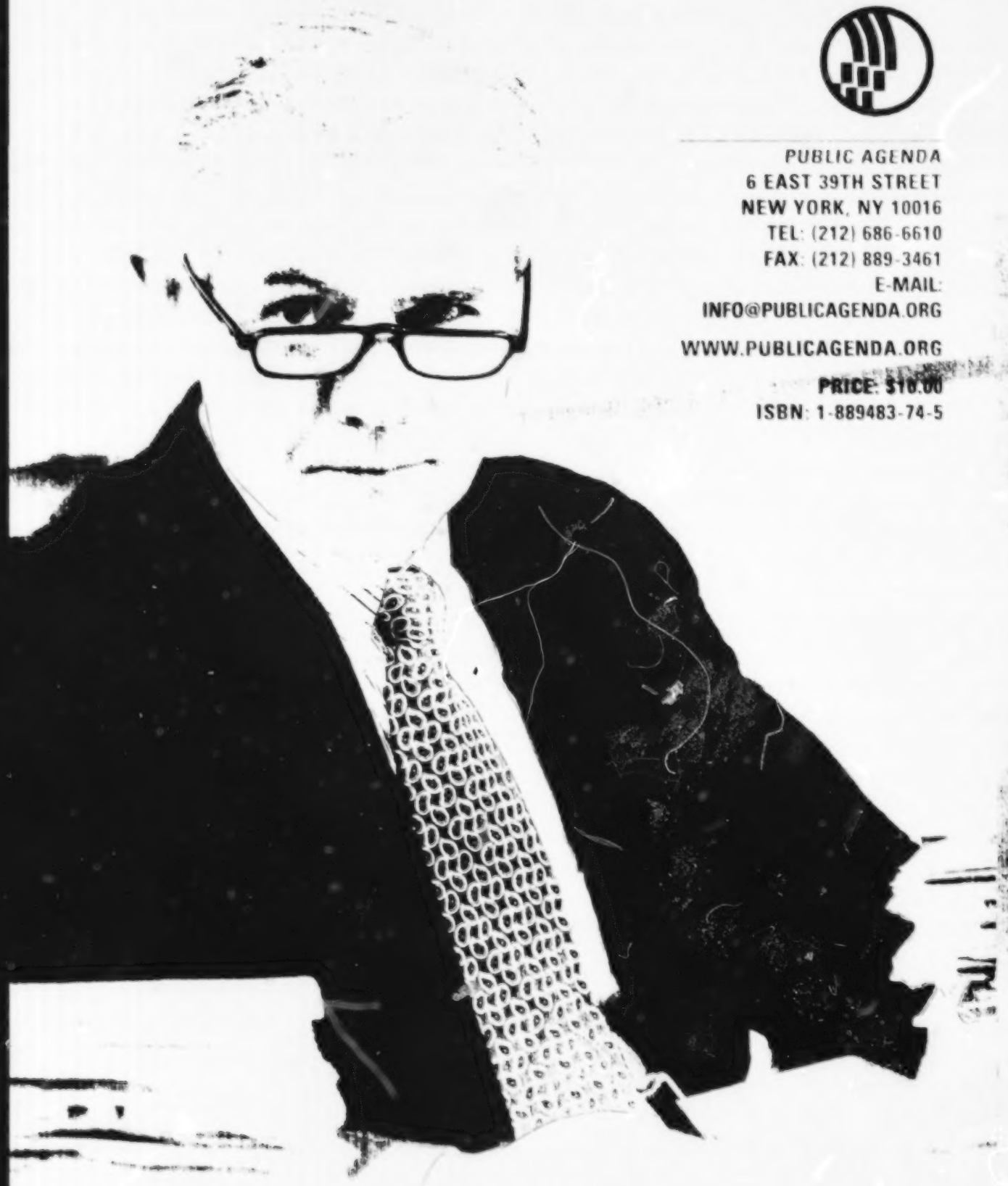

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